

DISCUSSION: AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS 1950-2000

M. C. Conner

Using rather broad strokes in his paper, Dr. Schertz has identified some major issues and concerns traditionally confronting the rural sector, and responses by the Agricultural Economics profession. He and others seem to say we have neither recognized soon enough those issues and problems which are beginning to dominate the scene, nor responded with adequate research efforts in these areas.

Schertz, along with others cited, identifies equity problems as high priority in societal concerns. Equity, as expressed in these concerns, is cast in terms of greater equality of opportunity, resource ownership, and income. This suggests need for a major shift in objective functions, with heavy reliance on value judgments. Such a shift requires that research be focused on the difficult task of reconciling, through the production process, society's production objectives with its income distribution objectives. For example, does accomplishment of this task call for development of an income redistribution system that is substantially independent of production, in order to minimize restraint on the production system?

Demands are made increasingly, particularly by public agencies, that research produce answers, directions or solutions ready for implementation. It no longer seems adequate to stop at an economic evaluation of alternatives. We have been accustomed to making such evaluations available to the entrepreneurial decisionmaker, who accepts the risks of his choices. But it may be that new concerns and issues change the clientele whom we seek to reach and serve. This new clientele may not be a risk-bearer in the same sense as the entrepreneur. If this clientele is primarily public agencies, for example, it may wish to share this risk with the researcher. Perhaps it depends on the way the decision is implemented.

Furthermore, let me emphasize with Schertz that addressing emerging issues and new clientele is not without risk for the researcher. His work will generate controversy in which he may become embroiled. The troubles of BAE in the early 1950's was a foretaste. Witness the intense feelings currently growing out of land use planning.

In one part of his paper, Schertz has alluded to the shifting role or emphasis of the agricultural economist. But has he given due recognition to the "rolling with the punches" that the profession has undergone to keep oriented to shifting priorities? Years ago, management of agricultural firms received our attention. Then problems of production and marketing came to the front and engaged our best efforts during WW II and for some time thereafter. During this time, the agricultural sector moved through cycles of surpluses, shortages and back to surpluses. We turned our attention to cries for adjustments in agriculture. Soon we were concentrating on interregional competition problems. A resource economics orientation gained ascendancy in the early 1960s. This was quickly followed by community development and environmental emphases.

It would appear, then, that the profession has maintained a reasonably high degree of flexibility, but this has not avoided the problem of "too late with too little." Agricultural economists pride themselves on being applied researchers engaged in work on important problems. Even working on important problems, the lead time is seldom adequate. Joe Havlicek has an hypothesis that the way applied research gets funded is an important obstacle to timely research. Funding for important problems generally becomes available only after such problems are widely recognized as critical. This is too late, yet it is extremely difficult to muster support for problem areas yet to be defined

M. C. Conner is professor of Agricultural Economics at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. The author acknowledges helpful suggestions from Dr. Joe Havlicek of the same university.

as such. More current problems dominate.

As we contemplate the kinds of problems demanding attention from someone, questions of proper training for the task arise. How much reorientation in traditional training of the agricultural economist is needed? And in what direction? Perhaps no change in individual training is required, but rather a team effort encompassing

proper disciplines, whatever these may be. In any event, I agree with Schertz on the need for periodic opportunity to revitalize one's professional insights and analytical skills. It has been my thesis for a long time that every professional should be required, about every five years, to commit himself to a six-month period of well-planned professional development.